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SUBJECT: POLO PARTY'S INTERNAL RIVALRIES FLARE OVER THE FARC

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer - Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (U) Summary: Polo Democratico Senator Dussan's September 11 statement that "we are neither with the FARC, nor against the FARC" overshadowed the party's rejection of the FARC's armed struggle and generated an angry exchange with fellow Polo Senator Petro. Petro attributed Dussan's comment to the "lingering nostalgia" of some Polo members for the armed left, and said the party must denounce FARC crimes with the same intensity as paramilitary violence if it is to become a viable alternative for power at the national level. Party leader Carlos Gaviria minimized the controversy, attributing it to personal rivalries as much as to substantive differences over the approach to the FARC. End Summary

¶2. (U) On September 11, differences within the opposition Polo Democratico Party over its approach to the FARC--exacerbated by personal rivalries-- spilled into the public. Polo Senator Jaime Dussan's statement that "we are neither with the FARC, nor against the FARC" overshadowed party leaders' rejection of the FARC's armed struggle and triggered an angry exchange with fellow Polo Senator Gustavo Petro. Petro has repeatedly denounced FARC terrorism--leading the group to threaten his life--and called for the Polo to sponsor a congressional debate on the "FARCapolitica." The party's Executive Committee voted 23-6 against supporting Petro's harder-line statements against the FARC, reflecting both substantive differences and personal squabbles within Polo.

¶3. (U) Dussan later clarified his comments, condemning the FARC but explaining, "the Polo should not cut off the possibility of a negotiated political solution" with the group. Petro told us Dussan's comments reflect "lingering nostalgia" among some within the Polo for the 1970s, when everyone on the left in Colombia supported the armed struggle. Other Polo activists fear criticizing the FARC will elp President Uribe. As a result, they resist denouncing the FARC with the same intensity as the paramilitaries.

¶4. (C) Petro told us the Polo's position "distancing itself from the armed left" is not enough. Uribe and his political supporters routinely exploit alleged Polo sympathy with leftist guerrilla groups for political gain. If the Polo wants to broaden its electoral base and become a viable alternative to power at the national level, it needs to more actively condemn FARC and ELN violence, including ties between politicians and the terrorist groups. A El Tiempo

editorial on September 12 said the Polo faces a moment of trust and must define its position and come out against the FARC if it wants to govern.

15. (C) Petro said a potential peace process with the ELN would pose a dilemma for the Polo. If the party advocates lenient treatment for ELN leaders guilty of human rights violations after demanding harsher punishment for paramilitaries, it will reinforce the perception that it is "soft" on left-wing terrorism. Moreover, many demobilized ELN members would likely seek to join the Polo. The Polo should insist that any ELN leaders who join the party should first accept a grand truth accord ("Acuerdo de Verdad") which includes truth, some reparations, and some punishment. Even then, Petro said, the Polo will play a political price for accepting ELN members into its ranks.

16. (C) Gaviria told us Polo leadership had "repeated a thousand times that we completely reject armed struggle," and claimed the controversy reflected internal Polo rivalries as much as substantive differences on the FARC's violence. Gaviria said Petro, a member of Polo's 31-member Executive Committee, never attends Committee meetings which set party policy--all of which are based upon consensus and are "carefully and painfully negotiated word for word." Gaviria alleged Petro, a former-M-19 member, is being tough with the FARC to mask his rebel past and score points heading towards 2010 presidential elections.  
Brownfield